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Imagination
AND
Art in Gaelic Literature,

BEING

Notes on Some Recent Translations
... from the Gaelic. . .

A LECTURE

Delivered before the National Literary Society of Ireland
on February 16th, 1900,

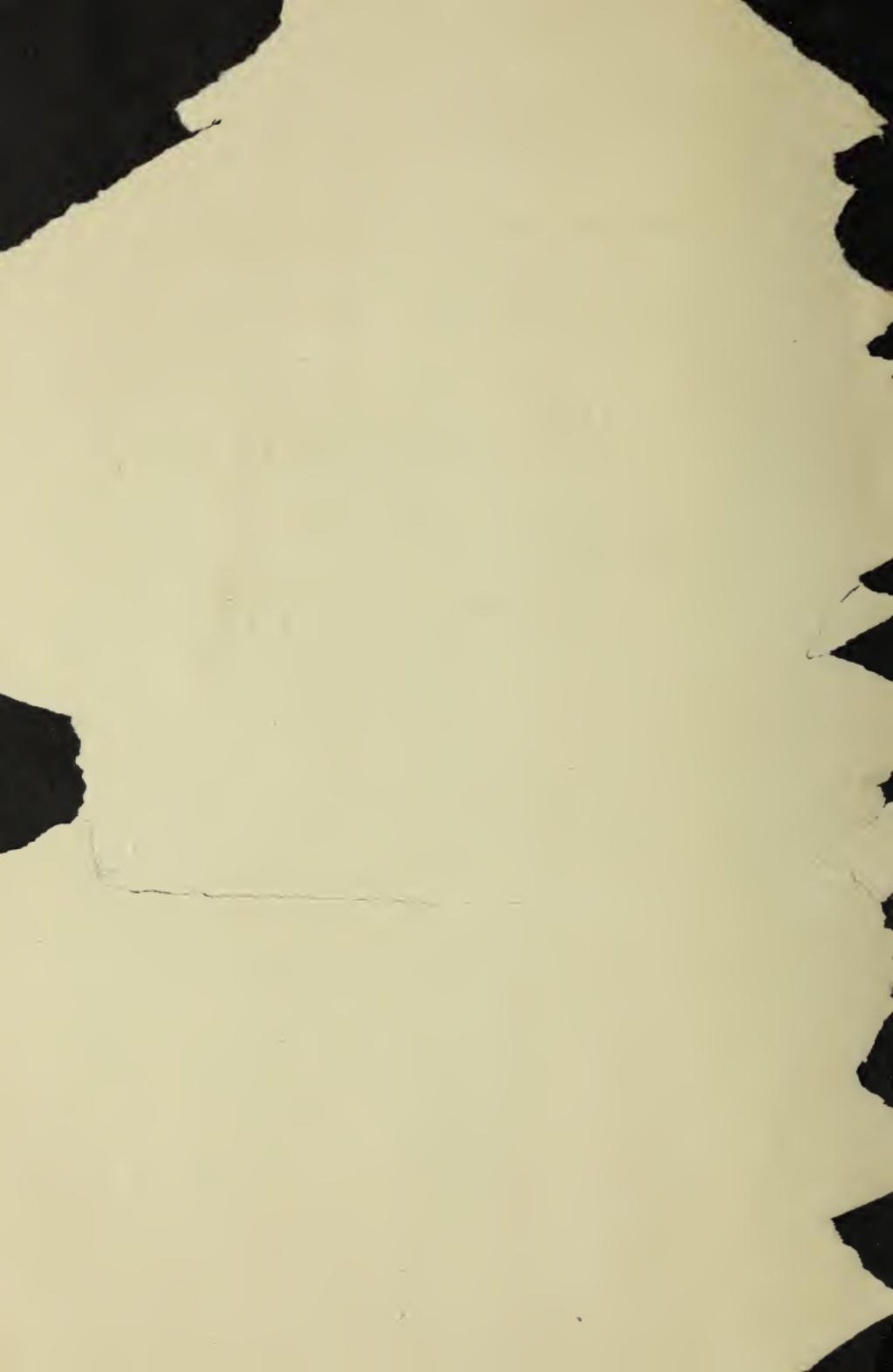
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Imagination and Art in Gaelic Literature.

In the plea uttered about eight years ago by Mr. Stopford Brooke urging the "Need and Use of getting Irish Literature into the English Tongue," Mr. Brooke observed that that early literature contained "stories of a finer imaginative quality than the early Welsh or English stories. Their poetical elements are more instinct with nature and humanity, and they have a more kindling and inspiring influence on the imagination of other peoples than flows forth from the beginnings of any other vernacular European literature."

If this is true—if even half of it is true—it is evidently a matter of great importance to have this literature, which so few, even of Irish scholars, can read in the original tongue, translated, and well translated. The lack of such translations was much felt at the period when Matthew Arnold delivered his memorable lectures on the study of Celtic literature. At that time the early literature of Ireland, by far the most important and extensive body of Celtic literature in existence, was very largely a sealed book. What Matthew Arnold had to go upon were the Welsh "Mabinogion," and of Irish literature practically no more than what he could pick out of the incidental renderings given by O'Curry in the various works of that great scholar. But O'Curry's business was not mainly with the literature we are now considering—the imaginative literature of Gaelic Ireland. Without any belittling of his priceless services, we may, I think, say that the imaginative side of things was not that

which appealed to him. In his MS. Materials he writes of one of the Cuchullin legends:—"Although the story at this point is especially enriched with poetic embellishments, still the natural incidents with which it abounds, and the curious sketches of, or perhaps I should say allusions to, the manners and customs of the state of society at a period so very remote will make ample amends in information of the most solid character for the exuberant display of the author's fancy."

This justification, which O'Curry more than once feels himself called upon to make for his attempt to interest us in Irish literature, shows plainly what he cared for and what he did not. But the things that he did not care for—the poetry, the "display of fancy"—that is to say, the imaginative side of the literature are the things which, I take it, we as members of the National Literary Society of Ireland, desire to see brought forward—not, of course, to the exclusion of manners, customs, history, topography, and folk-lore, but in addition to them.

Now, it is just in the rendering of the imaginative side of Gaelic literature that the work of our scholars was so long deficient. They were antiquarians rather than men of letters, and the genius of prose presided over their renderings even of the poetry with which, for the sake of the "solid information" embedded in it, they so frequently had to deal.

But within recent times a new spirit has come into, or perhaps I should say has made itself more widely felt in the work of scholars on the ancient literature. They are beginning to explore the imaginative side of it, and to render the poetry of it with grace and sympathy. Within the last ten years a great deal has been done by them to make the

imaginative literature of the Celt known to modern readers, and that means to make the Celt himself known, for it is in the works of the imagination that the character and temper of a race, and its outlook on things of heaven and earth, are made manifest. Almost contemporaneously with Mr. Brooke's lecture appeared what, I think, must be reckoned the greatest monument of Gaelic scholarship since the days of O'Donovan and O'Curry. I refer to the "Silva Gadelica" of Standish Hayes O'Grady. Since then we have had another publication of the highest importance and value in Dr. Sigerson's "Bards of the Gael and Gall"; and we have had Kuno Meyer's and Nutt's volume, the "Voyage of Bran"; Miss Eleanor Hull's "Cuchullin Saga"; the two volumes inaugurating the Irish Texts Society's publications, by Dr. Douglas Hyde and Dr. George Henderson; besides minor publications, such as Curtin's folk-lore collections and the volume of West Irish tales collected by the distinguished member of this society, whose loss to Irish literature we had recently to lament, Mr. William Larminie. I do not put forward this list as exhaustive, nor do I refer to translations and studies which remain in the pages of learned periodicals, and are therefore not easily accessible, save to scholars. But enough has been said to show that a considerable body of Irish literature—comprising about 90 distinct prose works and some 150 poems (not counting those embedded in the prose texts)—has now been made accessible to all readers, in translations which it would probably be impossible to better, whether from the point of view of scholarly accuracy, or reproduction of whatever poetic beauty the originals may have had. We have at least, therefore, made a good beginning in the collection of the material on which an estimate of the Celt, and his character, and his contri-

bution to the history of the human spirit, may be formed, as well as of the real worth of the literature he left behind him.

In my opinion we ought to enter upon this investigation with sympathy, because without sympathy one never finds out the real worth or truth of anything—but also with scientific impartiality. The Celtic stock in this island, which in the beginning was mixed to some extent with the blood of an earlier and probably non-Aryan race, has been subsequently mingled more deeply with Scandinavian and Saxon elements, and the Irish people of this day are probably only Celtic in the same degree as the English people are Saxon. In both cases we have the mingling of Celtic, Norse, and Low German blood—here one of these elements is dominant, and (until recently) one of the languages pertaining to them—there another element and another language. But in both cases it is substantially those three elements which have gone to make up the nationality as we have it now. We must take our stand on what we can do now, with our present endowments and energies—not on what Oisin may have done—just as the English take their stand on Shakespeare or Shelley or Keats, not on Beowulf. All the same, the achievements of our earlier writers in the building up of a national literature remote from the influences of the great classical models, and reflecting in the purest known form the traits of that Celtic stock which, if it does not count for everything with us, does yet count for so much—these achievements must necessarily be a study of deep interest for us, and indeed for the rest of the world too. The materials of this study are now extant, not as fully as it is to be hoped they will be, but far more fully than they were in Matthew Arnold's time, and they call for critical investigation at the hands of those

who are most closely allied in race and country to the writers. It is more with the idea of calling for this investigation and indicating the nature of the field that now lies open to it, than of undertaking it myself that I have written this paper.

Imaginative literature has two themes to deal with—Mankind and Nature. I do not speak in this connection of purely religious literature, embodying a definite creed, which has a place apart and laws and conditions of its own. But, of course, a literature dealing with mankind must be judged among other things, by the nature of the spiritual laws, if any, which it recognises as living forces in human society, and to that extent it looks out upon the divine as well as upon the human world.

Now we have in the works I have mentioned a very rich and interesting collection both of the nature poetry of the Gael and of that which deals with humanity. As regards the former—nature poetry—the principal work translated in *Silva Gadelica*—the long prose piece known as the “*Colloquy of the Ancients*”—must have been quite a revelation to many readers. This work is one of the Ossianic cycle of Irish prose romances, but it is rather a collection of tales than an individual work of literary art, and thus illustrates what the explorer will so often meet with—the inability of the Celtic writer to give form and composition to a work of any length. The “*Colloquy*” opens by presenting us with the figures of Caeilte MacRonan and Oisin, son of Finn, each accompanied by eight warriors, all that are left of the great fellowship of the Fianna after the battle of Gabhra, and their later dispersion and melting away through old age and sorrow. A vivid picture is given us of the grey old warriors who had lived on into a new age, meeting for the last time at the dun of a once famous chieftainess named Camha, and their melancholy

talk of old days, till at last a great silence settled on them all. Finally Caeilte and Oisin resolved to part, Oisin, of whom we hear little more, going to his mother, Blai, a woman of the Sidhe, whilst Caeilte takes his way over the plains of Meath till he comes to Drumderg, where he lights on St. Patrick and his monks. "The clerics," says the writer, "saw Caeilte and his band draw near them, and fear fell on them before the tall men with the huge wolf-hounds that accompanied them, for they were not people of one epoch or of one time with the clergy." Patrick then sprinkles the heroes with holy water, whereat legions of demons who had been hovering over them fly away into the hills and glens, and "the enormous men sat down." Patrick, after inquiring the name of his guest, then says he has a boon to crave of him—he wishes to find a well of pure water from which to baptise the folk of Bregia and of Meath. Caeilte, who knows every brook and rath and wood and hill in the country, thereon takes Patrick by the hand, and leads him away till, as the writer says, "right in front of them they saw a loch-well sparkling and translucent. The size and thickness of the cress, and of the *pocta ct* or brooklime that grew on it was a wonderment to them; then Caeilte began to tell its fame and qualities, in doing of which he said:—And then follows an exquisite little lyric on the well:

"O well of *Traig van*, beautiful are thy cresses, luxurious, branching; since thy produce is neglected on thee thy brooklime is not suffered to grow. Forth from thy banks thy trout are to be seen, thy wild swine in the wilderness; the deer of thy fair hunting cragland, thy dappled and red-chested fawns! Thy mast all hanging on the branches of thy trees; thy fish in estuaries of the rivers; lovely the colour of thy purling streams, O thou that art azure-hued,

and again green with reflection of surrounding copse wood!"

After the warriors have been entertained, Patrick asks, "Was he, Finn mac Cumall, a good lord with whom ye were"? Upon which Caeilte replies:—

"Were but the brown leaf which the woodland sheds from it gold—were but the white willow silver—Finn would have given it all away."

He then goes on to enumerate the glories of Finn's household, whereon Patrick says:

"Were it not for us an impairing of the devout life, an occasion of neglecting prayer, and of deserting converse with God, we, as we talked with thee would feel the time pass quickly, warrior!"

Caeilte goes on with another tale of the Fianna, and Patrick now fairly caught in the toils of the enchanter, cries, "Success and benediction attend thee, Caeilte, this is to me a lightening of spirit and mind; and now tell us another tale."

And so ends the exordium of the "Colloquy." Nothing could be better contrived, the touch is so light, there is so happy a mingling of pathos, poetry, and humour, and there is so much dignity in the sketching of the human characters introduced that one is led to expect something very admirable when the plan of the writer develops. Unfortunately, the expectation is not wholly fulfilled. The rest of the piece consists in the exhibition of a vast amount of topographical and legendary lore by Caeilte, punctuated with the invariable "success and benediction attend thee" of Patrick. They move together, on Patrick's journey to Tara, and whenever Patrick or some one else in the company sees a town or a fort, or a well he asks Caeilte what it is, and Caeilte tells its name and a Fenian legend to account for the name, and so the story wanders on through a maze

of legendary lore, good, bad, or indifferent, until the royal company meet them, and the King takes up the role of questioner. The "Colloquy," as we have it now, breaks off abruptly as Oisin is about to relate how the Lia Fail was carried away out of Ireland. A few fresh characters are introduced in the person of provincial kings whom Patrick meets with, but they have no dramatic or other significance, and are merely names. The interest of the "Colloquy," then, lies in the tales of Caelte and in the lyrics introduced in the course of them. Of the tales there are about a hundred, telling of Fenian raids, and battles, and love-makings, and feastings, but the greater number of them have to do with the intercourse between the fairy folk, the Tuatha de Danann, and the Fenians. With these folk, the people of the Sidhe, the Fenians have constant relations both of war and love. Some of these tales are of great elaboration, and evidently wrought out in the highest style of the literary art known to the writer, whom, according to Nutt, we are to place towards the end of the 13th century. One of the best is that of the fairy Brugh of Slievenamon which Caelte and Patrick chance to pass by, and of which Caelte tells the following history:—One day as Finn and Caelte and five other champions of the Fianna were hunting at Torach, in the North of Ireland, they roused a beautiful and timorous fawn which fled from them, they holding it chase all day till they reached Slievenamon towards evening, when it vanished underground. A night of snow and storm came on, and searching for shelter they found a great illuminated mansion, and entering it discover themselves in a bright and spacious hall, with eight and twenty warriors and as many fair and yellow-haired maidens, and one maiden sitting on a chair and playing wonderful music on a harp. After the Fianna have been seated

on chairs of crystal and entertained with the finest of viands and liquors, it is explained to them that their hosts are sons of Midir, son of the Daghdha, of the Tuatha de Danann—and that they are at war with the rest of the fairy folk, and have to do battle with them thrice yearly on the green before the Brugh. At first each of the 28 had 1,000 warriors under him—now all are slain but the sons of Midir—for it seems that the Danann race, though not liable to old age or sickness, can suffer violent death. Accordingly they have sent out one of the maidens in the shape of a fawn to entice the Fenian warriors to their fairy palace, and gain their aid in the battle that must be delivered to-morrow. Finn and his companions are ready for any fray, and a desperate battle ensues, which lasts from evening till morning; for the fairy host attack at night. The assailants are beaten off, losing over a thousand of their number, but Oscar Dermot and MacLugach of the Fenians were sorely wounded. And so the tale goes on through various adventures till after more than a year the chieftains go forth from the Brugh and re-join their fellows, during the feast of Tara, after having made peace and taken hostages from the hostile army of the Sidhe. No sooner has Caelte finished his tale, standing on the spot where they had found the fairy palace on the night of the snow, than they see approaching them a young warrior, who is thus described:—"A shirt of king's satin was next to his skin, over and outside it a tunic of the same soft fabric, and a fringed crimson mantle confined with a bodkin of gold upon his breast; in his hand a gold-hilted sword, a golden helmet on his head." A delight in the colour and the material splendour of life is a very marked feature in all this literature. This splendid figure turns out to be Donn Mac Midir—one of the eight-and-twenty whom Finn had suc-

coured, and he comes to do homage for himself and his people to Patrick, who accepts entertainment from him for that night; for in the "Colloquy" the relations of the Church and of the fairy world are very kindly.

This history of which, of course, I have merely given a bald summary, is a good specimen of the kind of tales of which the "Colloquy" is made up, and of which a great part of ancient Irish literature is made up. There is one general characteristic about them all—the predominance of the folk-lore element.

In folk-tale it is the happenings that are the great thing, not the persons to whom they happen. The story moves on its appointed course, and everything else is subordinate to that—men and women are merely part of the mechanism of the tale. So it is with the "Colloquy." An element of physical beauty is added which does not necessarily belong to folk-lore, and occasionally—as in the introduction to the "Colloquy"—we have a transitory attempt to render character and incident with truth both to nature and to an ideal conception; but, on the whole, the folk-tale element dominates, and though folk-lore is, no doubt, at the root of all national literature, it should not be forgotten that literature proper begins when folk-lore ends. To study these Gaelic tales in connection with the Norse sagas is a very instructive experience. The work of the Norsemen was rough and harsh in texture, and, though not without a sense of beauty, there is none of that delight in it which we find in Irish tales. But the Norsemen created men and women, living in the actual world, having normal human relations with their fellows, and having strongly-marked characters and passions; and these characters and

passions of theirs, acted upon by circumstance and reacting on it, *make the story*. In the Irish tales, on the contrary, we are in a dream-world—a very beautiful world, full of the magic of nature and of forms belonging to fairer realms than ours, but still a world of dream, where nothing is constant, but events drift at the whim of the narrator, and the laws of nature and human character all dissolve and change and re-form again like wreaths of mist on the mountain side; and when this vision has passed us by we feel as if we had seen something beautiful, or terrible, or wonderful, but in any case something that has no discoverable relation to life. The moral conceptions which give meaning and coherence to life have simply no existence in the world of the "Colloquy." We rarely gain any sense of human power or valour, because we do not see them really matched with hostile forces. Warriors go forth to battle and slay hundreds of enemies as if they were the puppets that Don Quixote fought with, or leap over whole armies; and if they are wounded the wound closes again by magic art; they are "such stuff as dreams are made of." And I confess it's somewhat disappointing to find a long and important work of this kind, a work written by a master of language and of the lore of his country eight centuries after the introduction of Christianity, six centuries after the bloom of that civilisation which produced the Book of Kells and other great works of decorative art, and four or five centuries after the period when Ireland had justly been called the University of Europe, still so largely unable to free itself from folk-lore, and to put off the things pertaining to the childhood of a nation.

On the other hand, if Irish literature was backward in this respect, there was another in which it was many.

centuries in advance of its time. I refer to the love of natural beauty.

I have already quoted one of the nature lyrics of the "Colloquy." The piece contains several poems of this description, recited on various occasions by Caeilte, and they show a minute and loving observation of nature, and more than that, an ecstatic blending of the human emotion with the great cosmic life, that did not appear in any other European literature till the present century, with Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley. Chaucer, who lived not far from the time of the "Colloquy," is sometimes spoken of as a nature poet, but high as he stand beyond the Celtic writer in his treatment of humanity, his references to nature and the life of forests and streams and the creatures that inhabit them are conventional and tame compared with those of the "Colloquy."

Another point to be noticed is the love of wonder and mystery, which is indeed an element in all true romance, but which inspired the Celt, I think, more than any other man. He was a master of the touch that makes, as it were, the solid framework of things translucent, and shows us, through it, gleams of another world, mingled with ours yet distinct, and having other laws and characteristics. We never get a clue to what these laws are. The Celt did not systematize the unknown, but he let it shine for a moment through the opaqueness of earth and then withdrew the gleam before we understood what we had seen. Take, for instance, this incident in the story of the Fianna. Three young warriors came to take service with Finn, accompanied by a gigantic hound, of which it is said that there was no colour in the world that was not in his hide. They make their agreement with Finn, saying what services they can render and what re-

turn they expect, and one of the conditions is that they shall camp apart from the rest of the host and when night has fallen no man shall come nigh them or see them. Finn asks the reason for this prohibition, and it is this: of the three warriors one of them dies each night and the other two have to watch him; therefore they would not be disturbed. There is no explanation of this—possibly the folk-lorist or the occultist may have one, but as it appears in the “Colloquy” it gives that peculiar thrill of mystery which is better, perhaps, not explained or explained away, because it brings home to our consciousness what is a very real fact, that the world we live in is a profound mystery quite incapable of being forced in its completeness into any framework of mechanical law.

Again, take this tale: One day Finn and his warriors beheld a great form coming towards them; it turned out to be a young giant maiden, who gave her name as Bebhionn, daughter of Treon, from the Land of Lasses. The gold rings on her fingers were as thick as an ox's yoke, and her beauty was dazzling. When she took off her gilded helmet, all bejewelled, says the narrator, her fair, curling, golden hair broke out in seven score tresses, and Finn cries, “Great gods of our adoration, a huge marvel Cormac and Eithne and the women of the Fianna would esteem it to see Bebhionn, the blooming daughter of Treon.” While they are talking with her, however, there comes up swiftly a young man in a green cloak with a brooch of gold, and bearing a red shield and a thick-hafted spear. Without a word he passes through the wondering Fianna, thrusts his spear through the body of the maiden, and then passes forth again before any can slay him. Caeilte and others chase him to the seashore and follow him into the surf,

but he strides out to sea and is met by a great galley, which bears him away to unknown regions. In this tale we have the element so often associated with mystery in these Celtic tales—the element of beauty, and to this, perhaps, it is due that although these tales seem to come from nowhither and to lead nowhither, but move, as I have said, in a dream-world in which all realities, as well as all moral ideals, are dissolved in a magic light, yet they linger in the mind with a haunting charm which is at least a potent spell against the influences of materialism.

Another point of much interest is suggested by the "Colloquy." We are all acquainted, more or less, with the Dialogue of Oisin and St. Patrick, in which the machinery is much the same as in the "Colloquy"—Oisin, instead of Caeilte, telling Fenian tales to Patrick, with interludes of conversation between the two old men, representatives of different epochs of the world's history. The relation of these two works, the Oisin Dialogue and the Caeilte Dialogue—which came first, where they respectively originated, and what each represented—constitutes, as Mr. Alfred Nutt has pointed out, a literary problem of the greatest interest and importance, and one which no one has ever attempted to solve, or, indeed, until quite lately, even to call attention to? For though the machinery and framework of the two pieces is identical, the working out—in one important particular—is as different as possible.

In the Oisin Dialogue there is a great deal of coarse humour and of crude theology, resembling that of an English miracle play rather than any Celtic product that I am acquainted with. St. Patrick, as Mr. Nutt says, is a sour-hearted bigot, always dinging into Oisin's ear that Firn and his old comrades are damned for ever, as Oisin himself is like

to be, while Oisin, an arrogant and ignorant Pagan, pours contempt and abuse on the whining clergy, with their eternal psalm-singing and bell-ringing, and contrasts the glorious, manly life of Fianna, declaring that Finn has only to put forth his strength to conquer both the devil and the Almighty. Now, in the "Colloquy," there is not one word of this. The contrast is most remarkable. Caeilte embraces Christianity with a whole-hearted belief, and salvation is not denied to the heroes and comrades of his youth. Patrick, indeed, assures Caeilte of the salvation of several of them, including Finn himself. One of the fairy folk who had been bard to the Fianna delighted Patrick with his minstrelsy. "A good cast of thine art is that," says Patrick, "but for a twang of the fairy spell which infests it; barring which nothing could so nearly resemble heaven's minstrelsy." Says Brogan, "if music then there is in heaven, why should there not on earth, wherefore it is not right to banish minstrelsy." Patrick made answer: "Neither say I any such thing," and, in fact, the minstrel, though one of the Danann race, is promised heaven for his art. Brogan, who is Patrick's scribe, is called on continually to write down and preserve the tales related by Caeilte. These are the sort of pleasant relations that prevail in the "Colloquy." Caeilte represents all that is courteous, dignified, and magnanimous in Paganism, and Patrick all that is benign and gracious in Christianity, and instead of the two epochs standing over against each other in violent antagonism and separated by an impassable gulf, all the finest traits in each are seen to blend and harmonise with those of the other. We may leave this subject with the quotation of a fine and remarkable utterance of Caeilte's. After his meeting with Patrick he has rendered a service to the Danann folk in slaying three Danish warriors who

were molesting them, and they offer him in recompense the return of his youthful form and vigour. Caelte replies:—

“That were a miserable thing that I should take on me a shape of sorcery! By no means will I take any other than that which my Maker and Creator, He that is the Very and Glorious God hath conferred on me, and which the rule of faith and devotion of that Tailchenn with whom I foregathered in Ireland doth assign to me.” “A true warrior’s and a very hero’s utterance is that,” they replied, “and the thing that thou sayest is good.”

It would be easy to devote a whole lecture to the pieces of interest in *Silva Gadelica* alone (in particular I should like to refer to the curious and fascinating tale of the Death of Fergus), but as this was not my intention I must now pass on to other and more recent works. Dr. Sigerson’s “Bards of the Gael and Gall” as, I suppose, most of us are aware, is a collection of Irish verse, rendered in the same metres, and with the same complex prosodical structure, as the originals, and embracing a mass of poetry from the earliest times down to the end of the last century. This volume is invaluable to the lover of literature, and has given us what we never had before, a conception of what the form of Gaelic verse was like, but it is not so important to the student of the Celtic mind, for the obvious reason that verse translation of poetry never can be relied on to render precisely what is in the original, especially where an extremely complex and intricate form has to be reproduced in another language. It is all but impossible that conceptions and ideas belonging to the translator’s own mind and epoch and country will not slip in where the literal rendering has to be departed from in order to secure the correspondence in outward form. At the same time I am bound to say that wherever I have been able to compare Dr. Sigerson’s work with the original—as for instance in some of the nature-lyrics of the “Colloquy” rendered

by O'Grady in literal prose—the correspondence in substance as well as in form has been perfectly accurate, nothing is added and nothing omitted; an achievement, the difficulty of which will be appreciated by those who have attempted something of the kind. Still one never can feel oneself, from the point of view of the student of a nation's thought and mind, so safe with a poetic version as with a good prose one—the record may be perfectly correspondent in all particulars, but it may also be as different as Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen" is from the "Rosin Dubh." Taking things as they are, however, Dr. Sigerson's volume harmonises with all that we learn from prose sources of the characteristics of Gaelic literature. We notice that extraordinary physical sensitiveness which probably lay at the bottom of the exquisite nature poetry, as well as of the elaborate structure of the verse and of the peculiar euphonic laws of the Gaelic language. The incoherence which marks most of the longer prose pieces in old Gaelic literature does not, of course, come to light in a collection of lyrics; but we do, I think, notice an unsteady grasp of character, a certain inability to sound the depths of human thought and passion, and to present them in action. The Gaelic harp responds in strains of beautiful melody to every breath of emotion that passes over it, but the lack of a foreseeing, co-ordinating, governing mind, capable of evolving architectural compositions of enduring strength, becomes, I think, evident when one has listened to these strains for long. They seem deficient in what I may call the dramatic element—an element which is by no means confined to the drama, properly so called, but which enters into all poetry of the highest class, and gives it force and penetration. What I mean by the dramatic element is the power of imagining, and represent-

ing human powers or qualities in action, as opposed to the mere description of them. For an illustration of this let us take a seventeenth century Gaelic lament for Owen Roe O'Neill, translated by Dr. Sigerson, and put it beside Thomas Davis's. The Gaelic bard sings like this:—

How great the loss is thy loss to me!
A less to all who had speech with thee:
On earth, can so hard a heart there be
As not to weep for the death of Eoghan?
Och, ochon, 'tis I am stricken,
Unto death the isle may sicken,
Thine the soul which all did quicken;
And thou 'neath the sod!

I stood at Cavan o'er thy tomb,
Thou spakest no word through all my gloom;
O want! O ruin! O bitter doom!
O great lost heir of the House of Niall!
I care not now whom death may borrow,
Despair sits by me night and morrow,
My life henceforth is one long sorrow;
And thou 'neath the sod!

The poet, you see, is telling us how sorry he is. But a thousand lines of this kind of thing do not reach the heart like Davis's one dramatic line:

Oh, we're slaves and we're orphans, Owen; why did you die?

Or again, to give an example from a primitive literature let us recur again to the Norse. In the Volsunga Saga we are told that one of the marked traits of Sigurd was the terrible power of his gaze, he had eyes before which no man could stand; "few," says the Saga, "durst gaze up under the brows of him." Now, after he was dead his daughter, Swanhild, the child of Sigurd and the Valkyrie Brunhild, was wedded to a husband whom she despised and hated. She was unfaithful to him, and her punishment was to be bound hand and foot and placed sitting in a gateway through which a drove of wild horses should be driven to trample her to death. But she inherited the terrible eyes of Sigurd, and when the wild horses swept down upon her they dared not face those eyes, and turned aside;

and by no means could they be got to trample upon her until her head had been bound in a sack. Now, the typical Gaelic bard, I can imagine, would have exhausted the vocabulary of a language whose very richness and melody has been a snare to its writers, to describe the power of Sigurd's gaze, but he would hardly have devised anything that burns itself into the memory like that scene of the death of Swanhild.

I must content myself with but a brief mention of another of the recent volumes of Gaelic translation —the “Voyage of Bran,” by Nutt and Meyer. We have here a book of singular fascination. I know no better words to describe the effect of it than those which Matthew Arnold has used of some other fragments of early literature:—

“These,” he says, “are no mediæval personages; they belong to an older, pagan, mythological world. The very first thing that strikes one in reading the ‘Mabinogian’ is how evidently the mediæval story teller is pillaging an antiquity of which he does not fully possess the secret; he is like a peasant building his hut on the site of Halicarnassus or Ephesus; he builds, but what he builds is full of material of which he knows not the history, or knows by a glimmering tradition merely; stones ‘not of this building,’ but of an older architecture, greater, cunnerier, more majestical.”

I do not mean to apply Matthew Arnold’s explanation to the Irish wonder-tales of the Celtic Other World in the “Voyage of Bran,”—it is very doubtful how far it can be applied even to the ‘Mabinogion’—I mean the explanation of the mystery and incompleteness of this literature by supposing it to be a mediæval working up of the relics of what was once a great pagan piece of literary architecture. The Celt was no architect; and what Arnold took

for mysterious ruins represent more probably as they certainly do in the "Voyage of Bran," the first efforts at shaping a fabric of spiritual thought on the basis of gleams of intense but transient intuition. But whatever the cause, at any rate the visions and wonders told of in this volume have the effect of a great piece of ruined sculpture—they look like fragments, covered with delicate carving, but broken or unfinished—so full of beauty and suggestion that they haunt the memory, but incapable of being reconstructed into a perfect whole.

I now come to a recent book on which high expectations were centred, and which has certainly revealed and made accessible to us a great tract of Irish heroic literature—the "Cuchullin Saga," edited by Miss Eleanor Hull. We have here a number of scattered tales—by no means all that exist, but a considerable, number—bearing on the birth, career, and death of the greatest of Celtic heroes, Cuchullin. These tales were composed at widely different dates and are often fragmentary in character and often in conflict with each other, but on the whole they present a fairly complete and homogeneous picture of the hero upon whose career the Irish sagamen lavished all the resources of their art. Cuchullin had been made known to us both in Sir Samuel Ferguson's fine poem "The Naming of Cuchullin," and in the splendid episodes introduced into Mr. Standish O'Grady's "Mythical History of Ireland"—episodes which I am glad to see are now being published in connected form in Mr. O'Grady's "All Ireland Review." These writers have given the great Ultonian cycle its true place in modern Anglo-Irish literature and have fixed the type and personality of Cuchullin in that literature. Now, through the labours of Miss Hull, we have the true and original Cuchullin as the early Celtic imagination shaped him; and it becomes a very inter-

esting study to compare this antique figure with the same as re-created by the genius of the contemporary writers who have led the way in bringing back the fertilizing water of the old Celtic traditions to the shores left dry and barren by the ebbing of the Gaelic tongue. Now the first thing that strikes one is the ideality of the modern writers compared with the ancient, taking them as a whole. There is in them not only a greater unity of conception, but a nobler strain of thought. There are many places in the Cuchullin Saga which might be quoted to show that the Gaelic Cuchullin was a mere sensual savage. He is, in point of fact, much more than that, but the savage element is undoubtedly prominent enough. The conversation between Cuchullin and Emer in which she bids him, before he presumes to woo her, to go forth like a Malay head hunter, and slay his hundreds, not in a patriotic war, but in a mere sanguinary foray for blood, is not pleasant reading ; neither are the records of his innumerable infidelities, nor the attribution to him, among other titles to fame, of his being the chief seducer of the wives and daughters of Erin. A good deal of this recalls and goes far to justify, some of the severest strictures of Edmund Spenser on the moral characteristics of Irish bardic poems. At the same time there is no doubt that the figure of Cuchullin is a genuine and most impressive piece of poetic creation. The thing created is not altogether likeable or admirable, but it lives—it is a being, indeed, of terrific energy, and it is not wonderful that after some thousand years it has taken fresh life in a new tongue as well as in a nobler and humaner form. The tales relating to him in Miss Hull's volume are of very varying merit and interest. Some are fantastic absurdities, the product of a kind of mechanical romanticism to which Gaelic literature was prone.

Some, like the "Wooing of Emer," are apparently the debris of what may have once been a powerful tale. Others again, have a pathetic beauty like the auxiliary saga of the "Death of the Sons of Usnach," and in others we have the genuine heroic strain, like the tale of the Hound of Cullan, from which the hero got his name. But the *Tain Bo Cuailgne*, of which we have here an abridged version from the hand of Mr. Standish Hayes O Grady, overtops them all and everything else in Irish literature for the sweeping power of its narrative and the brilliance and passion of its descriptive writing. It has also much more form—more unity and constructive power—than is common with Irish sagas; it has a nobler and more ideal conception of Cuchullin, and the dramatic element, though liable to be overloaded with verbiage, is by no means lacking. It is defaced, no doubt, with barbarisms and fantastic exaggerations, like the description of Cuchullin when his battle-fury seized him, and when he underwent a most repulsive and monstrous distortion, or the account of Fergus hewing off the tops of hills with strokes of his sword. But these things, which might count for much in a work of less essential power and genius, are hardly visible in the blaze of creative energy which flashes through the *Tain Bo Cuailgne*. In it we have, I think, the greatest intellectual achievement, so far, of the Irish race; for it must be remembered that the modern presentation of the Cuchullin saga is in a great measure either based on the "Tain," or adopted bodily from it. In it Cuchullin appears as the defender and rescuer of his country—fierce and ruthless in war, but tenderly affectionate to his friends, and chivalrous even to his foes. He is slight and boyish in appearance, but gifted with a superhuman strength, and courage, and vitality. We feel, whenever he comes on the scene

in this tale, that we are in the presence of some immense elemental force—something spiritual and incalculable. An atmosphere of excitement surrounds him—the narrative, always rapid and vehement, seems to thrill and vibrate when he appears. In some indefinable way we are made to feel all through—though we are never told it—that something much greater, deeper, more momentous is here in question than a border foray on the marches of Ulster. There is rapt exaltation about the “Tain,” like the vast and intangible meanings of great music, suggesting strifes, destructions, victories, regenerations, going on in some divine sphere remoter and vaster than the intellect can comprehend. Such at least is the impression which this work has made on myself, and we know that among the ancient Irish it was regarded as something sacred and lofty beyond any other spiritual possession of the race. It is worth noticing that the very copy of this great pagan Saga from which Miss Hull’s rendering is taken, was written by the hand of Finn MacGorman, a twelfth century Bishop of Kildare, who adds at the close “a blessing to all who shall conscientiously recite the Tain as it stands here, and shall not give it any other form.”

I have now to notice the publications of the Irish Texts Society, which in its first year of work has given its subscribers two stately volumes containing works now published for the first time from MSS. The first of these is edited by Dr. Hyde, and contains two so-called “romantic” tales—the “Adventures of the Lad of the Ferule” and the “Adventures of the Sons of the King of Norway.” The second is the “Feast of Bricriu,” edited by Dr. George Henderson. Both of these give the Irish text on one side of the page and the English version on the other. I had at first hoped to make these volumes

the main theme of this discourse, but found them, from the literary point of view, altogether too disappointing. The first volume, in particular, is precisely the kind of thing which furnishes the Dr. Atkinsons and other enemies of the Gaelic movement with arguments to justify their position. It is not "superstitious" or "indecent," but it is profoundly "silly" Apart from Dr Hyde's own work in introduction, notes, etc., which, as always, is delightful and excellent, the contents of this volume appear to be from the literary point of view a kind of rubbish heap, which the folklorist or philologist might perhaps rake through with advantage, but which is utterly unworthy of being put before us in such handsome form, and treated by Dr. Hyde with an amount of care and scholarship and collation of MSS. which would befit an edition of a play of *Æschylus*. The "Adventures of the Lad of the Ferule" is simply a folk-tale of a very ordinary type, re-written, I take it, by some scribe who had just education enough to make him leave out whatever may have been homely and racy in the original folk-tale, and who was incapable of adding to it one ray of imagination or beauty or invention. It describes how a certain lad, an emissary from Fairyland, contrives to get Morrough, son of Brian Boru, to plunge into the depths of a lake in order to procure him a ferule for his stick; and how Morrough then finds himself in Fairyland—a very dull kind of Fairyland—and slays a giant who is ravaging the country. But if the first tale is poor the second tale, "The Adventures of the Sons of the King of Norway," is a production of a dulness which baffles description. Dr Hyde himself says of it:—"It does not deal with Ireland at all, nor with Irish people. It is not a growth of the soil nor a distinct folk-lore development in anything like the same

sense as "The Lad of the Ferule" is. . . . It smacks of pen and paper and cumbrous invention." In other words, it is simply a catalogue of dull absurdities—mechanical adventures with giants and kings and witches, and serpents, and "awful-great, very wondrous cats"—heaped together anyhow, told in a very pompous style, and without a scintilla of thought, or narrative talent, or verbal felicity, or sense of mystery or beauty, or any quality that could make such things readable. Truly the Celt, excessive in all things, is great even in dulness! An Anglo-Saxon homily is dull, a German novel is often dull, a Chinese fairy tale is dull, but this is a mere human and everyday dulness compared with the sublime vacuity of a Celtic tale like the "Sons of the King of Norway." It is only fair to say that Dr Hyde forestalls criticism to some extent by warning us in his preface that these tales are not put forward as "fair specimens of Irish literature." I should hope not. But for what, then, does the Irish Texts Society put them forward? What does it exist for, if not to give us "fair specimens of Irish literature?" The defence I gather from Dr. Hyde's preface and the prospectus of the society is that these tales furnish what is admittedly much needed, good and idiomatic text-books for learners of the language. The obvious answer to this is that if there is one thing which it is above all things desirable to put before learners who have got as far as reading books, it is works which *shall* be fair specimens of Irish literature and not things which, unless the learners are gifted with exceptional energy and enthusiasm are only too likely to give them an enduring disgust for everything Gaelic.

The second of the Irish Texts Society's publications, "The Feast of Bricriu," stand upon a very

different level. It is a piece of genuine ancient literature—hailing, if Dr. Henderson has judged aright, from the latter half of the ninth century, yet certainly, from the heroic period of the ancient literature. And it is written with a fair amount of spirit and humour and inventive power—it is really a piece of literature, which the first volume was not, and, as an ancient text, it has, of course, a considerable value for the student of literature from the scholarly point of view. At the same time, though dating from the heroic age, it is certainly not conceived in the heroic strain. Dr. Henderson suggests, and I think with a great deal of probability, that it belongs to a class of writings well-known in early literature—burlesques or parodies of some fine heroic tale, the smile which our ancestors occasionally permitted themselves at the high-flown imaginings of their bards. The substance of the piece is simply the description of a squabble—there is no other word for it—which arose between Cuchullin and two other heroes for precedence at a feast, and which has a counterpart or subordinate plot in a similar squabble among their wives, and the contests and trials and judgments which arose out of this. It was certainly worth editing and translating, and Dr. Henderson appears to have done his part most admirably, the translation is racy, and the notes and introduction full of varied interest; yet, I do not think that we have as yet, in accessible form, so much of the finer and more spiritual parts of the old literature as to be quite satisfied to see the Irish Texts Society, with such a field of work before it, occupying as yet only this rather uninteresting corner of that field. It is probable, however, that the choice of the Society is limited by many circumstances which ordinary members cannot be aware of. It certainly shows an excellent and attractive programme of future work,

and the more support it gets the better that programme will become.

In the beginning of this paper I referred to Mr. Stopford Brooke's lecture, "On the need and use of getting Irish Literature into the English Tongue." There is, undoubtedly, much need and use of that, but I wish to conclude by a practical suggestion of something else of which there is also much need and use, and that is the getting of classical Irish literature into the modern Irish tongue. Besides the Dictionary, which, I believe, is on its way, the great desideratum of the student and lover of Gaelic is that of readable books in the language as it was written and spoken from the days of Keating till now. Moreover, if there is ever again to be a living literature in Gaelic—a question I am not discussing here—surely, the best preparation for it would be to place before Irish readers the finest models, from the period when there was a literature, re-written in the language that is at present understood by the people. The language of the ancient literature is very different from the modern tongue, the good things in it are to be had in English, French, or German, only not in modern Irish.

The importance of this struck me deeply some time ago when looking up the original of the fine tale versified by Ferguson under the title of "Fergus Wrymouth." There exists a sort of burlesque version of this tale in *Silva Gadelica*, while Ferguson's original is to be found in a gloss on one of the Brehon Laws in the *Seanchus Mor*. I was anxious to see whether the fine heroic note, the stern brevity and, as it were, the Roman dignity of the tale, as Ferguson tells it, were added by him, or were features of the original. I found that he had added nothing, and pruned away nothing. The *Seanchus Mor* version of the tale is a piece of heroic narrative which

neither the Norse nor the Greek nor any other literature I am acquainted with can show anything to surpass in its own way. And I thought, why should not this noble tale find its way into modern Irish instead of the childish folk stories, or inferior tales like the "Boyish Exploits of Finn," which too largely represent the output of the modern cultivation of Gaelic? There are not a few other tales which by a little fresh artistic treatment in the way either of expansion or compression done by such a hand as Dr. Hyde's would lend themselves admirably to reproduction for modern readers, for instance, the story of the Death of Cuchullin, the Judgment of the Sword, the Naming of Cuchullin, the Fight at the Ford, one or two of the Fenian tales from the "Colloquy," the tale of the Death of Conary, the tale of Deirdre. These would form a volume or two of Irish literature such as no Irish reader possesses at present, and one that would greatly enlarge the possibilities of the Gaelic movement, and have a powerful effect in attracting students. Let us, therefore, have ancient Gaelic literature, not only in the English tongue, but also in the modern Gaelic tongue, and thus make it what it deserves to be, a possession for the whole of Gaeldom. (1)

1. At the Oireachtas or Gaelic Festival held in Dublin in May, 1900, I see that a prize was offered for the best modernized version of an ancient Gaelic text.

MR. ALFRED NUTT AND THE IRISH TEXTS SOCIETY.

A letter from Mr. Alfred Nutt presenting a different view from mine of the first publication of the Irish Texts Society has appeared in the Press. I give it here in order that readers of my lecture may have the other side of the question before them as well. The best way to settle the dispute would be that everyone interested in it should become a member of the Irish Texts Society (8, Adelphi-terrace, London, W.C.), at the moderate annual cost of 7s. 6d., and thus receive the publications of the Society and study them for himself, besides supporting a most worthy and promising undertaking. Mr. Nutt says:—

“Mr. Rolleston is reported to have described the first volume issued by the Irish Texts Society as a ‘literary rubbish heap,’ which ‘would give the inquiring student a positive disgust for Gaelic literature.’

“I would venture to suggest that Mr. Rolleston lays too much stress upon literary, too little upon philological and historical considerations. Speaking with some confidence, I assert that if the standard of literary excellence which Mr. Rolleston desiderates had been made a *sine qua non* of publication fully one-half of the issues of the Early English Texts Society, many issues of the Société des Anciens Textes Français, and above two-thirds of the vast mass of Mediæval Texts which German scholars have edited during the last forty years, would never have seen the light. It may be said, since Monsieur F. Brunetière has said it with his usual emphasis, that the loss would have been trifling, and that the activity of the ‘Mediævalists’ has been misdirected. The argument of the ‘Mediævalist’ scholars—German, French, and English—runs briefly as follows—The literature of any race has a value and significance independent of its conformity to any standard, more or less arbitrary, of literary excellence, and independent of any æsthetic pleasure we derive from it; in it are mirrored the feelings, conceptions, outlook upon society, and nature of our forefathers. We may, or may not, approve of them; we may think we have progressed far beyond them—none the less is it of import to us to know them. And this knowledge must be based upon all sorts and conditions of facts and records; otherwise it will be partial and distorted.

Allow for one moment the justice of Mr. Rolleston's criticism. Allow that the romantic tales of which Dr. Hyde has printed two thoroughly representative specimens are 'rubbish.' It is of interest to know that this particular kind of rubbish was popular in 15th-18th century Ireland. Popular it undoubtedly was.

"The danger of judging in questions of this kind by purely literary tests may be illustrated by the well-known anecdote of Frederick the Great's contemptuous rejection of the 'Nibelungen Lied' when the first edition was presented to him. He did not think the 'rubbish' worthy of a place in his library. I am, of course, making no comparisons. But, personally, I wish to dissent from Mr. Rolleston's condemnation of these tales. I find them quite as interesting reading as the majority of Mediæval romances. I find them better reading than the 'Battle of Magh Rath,' or the 'Battle of Magh Leena.' I am sure I shall find the 'Wars of Thomond' when Mr. O'Grady publishes it much worse reading. But I don't take up texts like these simply with a desire to get good reading. I take them up primarily with a view to knowing something of the men for whom they were written, and of the conditions of their life. The fiction which delighted them is one of these conditions, and it is a matter of indifference whether or no it also delight me."

